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ABSTRACT

Discussed are issues in the identification and remediation of reading difficulties in elementary and secondary schools, and reported are results of a survey of 786 teachers of reading. Noted in the survey results are that 21% of the teachers had only two or more graduate courses in reading, and that only 4% or 2% of the teachers, respectively, had taken courses in learning disabilities or language development. Organization of the remedial program is considered in terms of program structure (i.e. regular classroom, tutoring, or full time special instruction), early identification at the kindergarten or first grade level, pre- and inservice teacher education, and the application of individualized pedagogical procedures. (DB)

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PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNIVERSITY

The basic responsibility of the public school is to attempt to educate each pupil to the full extent of his capacity.

For a multitude of reasons, there are pupils within any system who are not reading at a level comparable to their potential. Historically, these students were identified and remediated in the regular classroom by proper grouping and instruction. When this approach did not work special reading programs, outisde of the classroom, were instituted at the elementary and secondary level to supplement the developmental program. Now the literature suggests that special remedial classes cannot completely solve the problem and the pendulum is swinging back to remediation in the regular classroom. "Mainstreaming," "team teaching," "individualizing instruction," "open space programming"are all popular terms in the literature.

However, too often lip service is given to this "meeting the needs of the individual child;" in reality children are still lined up, spray gunned and then if that does not take, the pupil is a "problem."

It is the author's contention that these programs do not work because they are built on "quick-sand."

If a local unit is really going to individualize the instructional program to meet the needs of all children a solid foundation is required.

This foundation may include a set of basic principles that all pro--fessionals at the local school can accept and work with.

(1) More than just reading - a language arts or communication block of time

(2) All teachers involved

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(3) Need for early identification

(4) Recognition of wide range of individual differences

(5) Poor teacher education

(6) No one magic panacea

(7) Need for community involvement

(8) Necessity for administrative leadership

If the local staff accepts these concepts, there are five action steps needed for effective implementation.

(1) Array of skills

(2) Group diagnostic tool

(3) Teacher Education

(4) Materials

(5) Classroom and School Organization

When asked to prepare a paper on the "state of the art of reading teachers" for an interdisciplinary paper, I experienced great trepidation. My anxiety was aroused not by the difficulty of the assignment or the singular honor, but by the fear that I could not do justice to the task of accurately reporting in this manuscript the actual philosophies and actions that occur "out in the field."

Many of us in the past have been involved in futile attempts to build bridges of communication and cooperation among the various disciplines concerned with the exceptional child. Maybe we have failed because of semantic difficulties, but I suspect it has a lot to do with each discipline's determination to "guard its own turf," and resist, possibly unconsciously, the other professions' encroachments.

Somehow, though, we are going to have to learn to work together. Main-

streaming, decreased funding, and new federal laws demand cooperation and a "cease and desist" to a duplication of efforts.

In looking at the "role of the reading teacher," I interviewed 786 teachers who reported that their major responsibility was the teaching of reading. These professionals were attending reading and learning disabilities conferences throughout the country.

The literature consistently reports that skilled teachers make the real difference in successful reading programs. Of course, the number of courses one has taken does not guarantee competency in any area but it does reveal some valuable information.

1. 21% of the teachers reported that they have had a maximum of two graduate courses in reading. One has to wonder where they have developed the expertise to be qualified reading teachers.
2. The really alarming data is that only 4% and 2% of the teachers, respectively, have taken courses in Learning Disabilities or language development. If one believes that reading is an integral part of language arts, I don't see how a continuation of this trend can be justified. How will we ever be able to communicate with each other if we don't even recognize the importance of each others' disciplines?
3. On a positive note, over three-quarters of the professionals have had some academic training in reading diagnosis.

Analyzing the role of the reading teacher, one finds a wide variation of duties. Forty-one percent of the teachers work with small instructional groups. It is surprising that this percentage is not higher since this is the reading teacher's traditional responsibility. Less than 1/5 of the reading teachers reported that their major responsibility is to act as a

consultant or resource person for classroom teachers, and only 19% conduct teacher education programs. Approximately 3/4 of these teacher education programs are conducted after school - a practice that is of questionable value.

Many specialists believe that the major remediation program takes place in the regular classroom. This concept will be increasingly supported with the full fruition of the "main stream" philosophy. One wonders who will be responsible for helping to individualize the instructional program.

Discussion and Suggested Recommendations

Defining the Problem

One of the basic problems is that we cannot agree on what we are talking about. First, there is no agreement on the definition or the name of the disability with which we deal. Reading teachers use many labels such as remedial or disabled reader, strephosymbolia, associative learning disability, specific reading or language disability, congenital word blindness, primary reading retardation and developmental dyslexia. To avoid semantic confusion we must agree on the name. One school district may refer to all retarded readers as remedial; another agency, in the same community, may use the term remedial for the small group of children with specific learning difficulties.

Our next problem is defining the term we choose. Most of the current definitions are expressed in terms of specific etiology or measurable performance. Definitions cover genetic, organic, congenital, psychogenic, social and educational causes, and may include all pupils who are more than two years retarded in reading according to grade level or only those children with "associative learning problems." No one has been able to clearly validate the two year cut-off, let alone agree on how to measure grade level achievement. Standardized tests of ability and achievement are more suspect every day. One definition

that defines the disabled reader as one who cannot learn to read by conventional techniques or conventional school organization is quite different from the definition that states that the disorder is totally organic in nature. In fact, another semantic "hand-up" has developed since professionals have never been able to agree on a definition for the word conventional. Because of this lack of agreement we cannot even guess at the number of pupils involved. Experts quote figures from one-half of one percent to 20 percent of the total school population.

Administrative and Educational Inertia

Administrators often do not understand the problem; namely, that there are a large number of children who have not been successful learners with the traditional methods. Too often, lip service has been given to the "individual" child, "individualization" of programs, etc., but in reality children are lined up and spray-gunned, and then if that fails, the pupil is a "problem."

An effective program may take years to be proved successful. If administrators are not completely sold on the program, they may fear that they are doing something just too unorthodox and expensive. Pressure from board members and the public can build rapidly, and the tendency to look for the speedy magic panacea can become overwhelming.

The real problem may be that the decision-making personnel are often too far away from the classroom to observe the failures and to search for newer ideas about the causes. In large school districts, ideas must be forced through a great number of committees in order to gain acceptance. The danger of dilution and modification of these ideas after exposure to the committees is, therefore, a serious factor. It is difficult for anyone

removed from a day-to-day contact with children to be highly motivated about the small ideas and creative approaches that actually help children. People removed from interaction with pupils should be concerned with the administration of the program after the ideas have been proven to be effective. It is unfair to expect people who are not in constant contact with children to be very creative in things that affect younsters directly.

Organization of the Program

If a school system has defined the population it wants to consider in its disabled reader program, and if educators can agree on a basic philosophy for implementation, the next barrier is the actual organization and administration of the remediation program.

1. Structure of the Remediation Program

A decision must be made on what type of organizational program should be provided for these pupils, e.g., assistance in the regular classroom, remediation in small groups, involvement in a 1-to-1 tutoring program, or attendance in a full time clinic. Frequently, different departments (such as general instruction versus special education) develop empire-building conflicts that can retard the growth and development of the program. The prevalent attitude among many concerned but semi-informed educators is that the disabled child is so special that he must receive a special placement, thereby implying the necessity of his removal from even a modified program of studies. Unfortunately, with this philosophy in mind, a labeled "disabled child" may sit and vegetate in a regular classroom waiting for special help. The classroom teacher becomes so terrified by the diagnosis that she avoids contact with the disabled reader. If the educators become too fearful and concerned, the hopelessness which they feel in trying to help may result in their "standing still" until they can afford to establish a clinic.

Although a reduced class size, individual instruction, or an interdisciplinary clinic are undoubtedly ideal, the reader's situation can be greatly helped within the regular classroom structure with appropriate techniques.

A basic premise of remedial teaching is that each child needs to work at his own developmental level. This level may be different for each area of learning. In grouping the children, their levels of education and social development must be taken into account. However, when the children do get grouped, if the only factors taken into consideration are decoding, speed, and comprehension, then it is difficult to see any real change in the teaching approach. The top group does what the bottom group does - only faster. Where does this leave the child with excellent comprehension but faulty decoding ability? Where does this leave the child with both faulty comprehension and decoding? Unfortunately, it usually leaves him in the same reading group, using the same techniques as the top group - only moving at a snail's pace.

2. Early Identification

The literature underscores quite clearly the importance of early identification of children with reading disabilities. However, one of the major problems inherent in the identification of reading disabilities is that traditionally educators, physicians, and other professional workers concerned with the problem have relied almost exclusively on capacity and achievement scores determined by standardized tests. Standardized tests of reading achievement do not always indicate the pupil's optimal instructional reading level.

The picture is just as confusing concerning capacity evaluations. Most of the measuring instruments are tests that require reading, yet often they are given to students who cannot read or have not learned to read effectively. Furthermore, there is considerable variability between the different capacity-measuring instruments.

It is very difficult but very necessary to identify as early as the kindergarten level the potentially disabled children and to begin teaching them appropriately in the first grade. Most present first grade evaluation programs are not interpreted in a manner that identifies such children. Thus, we have no idea how many children we are talking about until they are third graders and the problem has changed from a preventive one to a remedial and emotional one. Sometimes a disabled reader is intelligent enough to simply memorize vocabulary and may not be considered a remedial case until the fourth grade. However, the cut-off grade in his school may be the third grade because of the school's concern and concentration on early remediation. If the child is lucky he may be seen twice a week. By then even the most intelligent child may need a minumum of one hour a day, and he probably needs to be seen alone. Very often administrators cannot accept this 1-1 relationship and assign their expensive reading specialist to large groups of pupils instead of small groups of dyslexics.

While it is generally not too difficult for the trained people working with disabled children to be able to identify them, it does require many disciplines in order to distinguish them from the organic or emotionally disturbed groups that share this problem.

Interdisciplinary teams can be very helpful in this area. Unfortunately, when medical and para-medical personnel work with teachers another problem arises - the problem of interdisciplinary communication. Very often each discipline sees the child in light of his own specialization. Everyone becomes a piece worker and the resultant mosaic is sometimes quite different from the original child. Another problem arises besides the communication difficulty. For years educators have considered the responsibility of teaching reading to be the exclusive province of the elementary teacher. Considerable re-edu-

cation will be necessary for effective interdisciplinary cooperation. Very often a good public relations job is needed to connect the program with regular classroom teachers, administrators, medical and para-medical personnel and parents. Generally, parental objection is not an obstacle. They usually are most anxious to cooperate when properly indoctrinated and informed.

3. Teacher Education

One of the major barriers to implementing a program for the disabled reader is the difficulty in obtaining qualified teachers. Many neophite teachers coming out of the teacher-training colleges do not understand the concepts and basic skills necessary for teaching a successful reading program. The problem of inadequately trained teachers is more pressing because it involves a serious difference of opinion among educators of teacher-training institutions. The argument over whether to emphasize subject matter courses or professional technique courses has been going on for some time. The subject matter proponents appear to be in the ascendancy. Local universities offer only the most minimal undergraduate training in myriad approaches to the teaching of reading. In fact, a secondary teacher of English or language arts can be graduated from most teacher-training schools in the country without having taken a course in the teaching of reading. The average primary teacher may be required to take one course in the teaching of reading or language arts.

To complicate matters, a large number of certified employed teachers have never had a course while in college in the teaching of reading, and many who have had a course do not appear to really understand the basic language arts concepts. The situation becomes one of greater concern when we face the fact that in most systems we are teaching reading by many different methods and that local schools change these methods from year to year. In addition, the

schools often have not agreed upon one systematic sequence of skills. This lack of an organized and accepted sequence of skills for all children and the switching from one pedagogical procedure or material to another cause innumerable problems for our inexperienced and even experienced teachers.

In the area of the severely disabled reader, the problem is a hundred times worse. Very few colleges even recognize the existence of this condition, let alone offer courses in the area at the undergraduate or graduate level. If educators cannot change the requirements or philosophies of the teacher-training institutions, then the local school systems must provide an ongoing program of in-service education and curriculum development. In other words, schools need to be prepared to not only teach children but also teach teachers.

Most present in-service programs consist of releasing teachers for training five or six days during the school year, or of educational meetings after school. This approach has not effectively trained teachers in the area of the reading disabled child.

Other types of traditional in-service, such as master teachers demonstrating with small groups of pupils, or national authorities lecturing on the finest pedagogical procedures are also of questionable value. Much enthusiasm and interest is generated but there is very little change or impact in the classroom.

The desperately needed in-service education of teachers can be conducted effectively at the local school level during the school day. Many administrators reject this concept of released time since it takes considerable planning and organization. Also, if local systems are going to train their own teachers they must find instructors who understand the uniqueness of the disabled reader and the unusual way he learns the language.

4. Pedagogical Procedures

Once the reading disabled child is identified and placed in the appropri-- ate program, the teachers must provide the proper pedagogical techniques. Unfortunately, popular techniques for teaching reading are not easily changed.

When a specific learning problem can be defined, individualized teaching methods, materials, and techniques should be utilized by the school system to help these children to circumvent or to overcome their particular learning disability. Unfortunately, in some programs every remedial pupil is exposed to only one particular technique. The selection of the specific pedagogical procedure may depend to a large extent on the training of the clinician and the bias of the diagnostic center. Educators embrace the philosophy of individual differences, but too often accept the "one right way" of teaching reading to all retarded readers. Pupils and teachers alike are made to adjust to the one procedure instead of the teacher and technique adjusting to the needs of the child. Too often teachers follow one policy blindly because some authority has said, "This is the way." As I suggested above, experience has demonstrated that there is no magic panacea for all children. Severely retarded readers have one consistent syndrome, aside from their retardation, and that is inconsistency. The clinician must select the appropriate technique through diagnostic teaching and use all sensory pathways to reinforce the weak memory patterns. The method or combination of methods that helps the individual child is the right method. A teacher must have considerable training and proficiency in all pedagogical procedures to follow this eclectic approach.

The solution to all these problems appears to be very simple - in theory. No one discipline will ever solve the problem by itself. However, if

we professionals concerned with the disabled child can pool our resources and talents; if we can stop guarding our frontiers and stop daring anyone to cross over; if we can learn to compromise and work together, the problem can be solved - if not for our own professional souls, at least for the souls of the children to whom we are committed to serve.